6-15-74

Almighty God, of all the names men have called you - of all the ways men have tried to describe you - the word ~~and idea that do it best~~ that does it best is father. For, out of your majesty you have come to us personally. Out of the mystery of the universe you have come among us in a way we can see & feel. Out of the deep experiences of life you come to us - in love, and joy, and grief and fear. And so, Almighty God, as we lift our hearts in praise and adoration, it is for that - that miracle of miracles - your love for us - your coming among us - that we feel most deeply.

Hear us as we pray: give us the courage to open our hearts and minds to you. Give us the Faith to trust - to ask - to share. Through ~~Jesus~~ Christ our Lord. Amen

God calls us to give thanks in all things. So let us reflect on what we have been given in life. ~~Let us give thanks~~. Each praying silently, let us give thanks

God's greatest gift to us is other people. Let us reflect on someone we love - someone who brings meaning to our lives - let us thank God for that person. - silently

Father, ~~teach us the grace of gratitude~~: we often forget to say thank you - to each other & to you: forgive us for that & teach us the grace of gratitude - through J.C. our Lord. Amen

God has called us to love the world - so let us pray for the world —

let us pray for ~~the~~ our president & secretary of state & for the success of their mission in the middle East . .

let us pray for our country, thanking God for our history - and men & women who have given their lives - that we might enjoy that heritage . .

let us pray for a new hope ~~and~~ & a new commitment among our government & people to the ideas of integrity and justice and responsibility.

Father, hear our prayers for the world - & help us to be instruments of your peace. Through J.C. our Lord. A—

Our Lord has invited us to pray for ourselves: He has promised that our prayers are heard & answered -

So let us share a personal concern: a problem or worry - silently

Let us ask God for help - support - ~~insert~~ let us ask him for what we need. silently

Father - ~~we are~~ you know us completely - hear these prayers that are private & personal: thru. J.C. our Lord. Amen

Almighty God, we are grateful for these moments together - for this new day & new week - for all you are & all you have made us to be . . Hear us now as we pray together the prayer our Lord taught

"WE BELIEVE IN GAMBLING"
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30
June 16, 1974 (Father's Day)

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most interesting documents in the Bible. It's not used much as a text for preaching and it's near the bottom of the list when Christians are chosing Biblical material to study. In fact, a rather prominent member of the congregation who shall remain anonymous expressed some surprise that there was a book in the Old Testament by that name.

In any case, there have been a number of efforts down through the centuries to remove Ecclesiastes from the Canon of the Bible and the reason has been that the author, unknown except that he went under the title "The Preacher," seems a little out-of-step with the rest of the Biblical writers.

This author - or editor - was a total realist, perhaps even a pessimist or fatalist of the *"QUE sera-sera"* variety. In the marvelous prologue to the book which I read this morning his basic philosophy is set forth -

(The new Jerusalem Bible translates -)

"A generation goes, a generation comes...
the sun rises, the sun sets.....
All things are wearisome...
What was will be again.....
There is nothing new under the sun...."

That really doesn't need much interpretation. It's a sentiment that keeps cropping up in the great and classical literature of the ages:

A well-known line from Macbeth puts it this way:

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
to the last syllable of recorded time;
and all our yesterdays have lighted fools
the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
signifying nothing." (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5,Line 19)

In our own time, a lot of literautre comes up with the same conclusion. Life is seen as a "waiting for Godot", but Godot never comes: a longing after Shangrila - but Shangrila exists only as a fantasy: life is absurd, meaningless.

The preacher in Ecclesiastes, then, sounds rather relevant if only because he said things about life that perceptive men have been saying ever since. In fact, his book describes a man who well might be a kind of contemporary prototype: when all was said and done he really hated life. He was a successful man. "He obtained an excellent education. He drank wine. He went into business and became rich. He married. He became interested in horticulture. He built a home. He traveled. He was elected to high office in Jerusalem. He had good health, He had it made: and he hated life." (Angell, Put Your Arms Around the City, P.174)

He sounds very much like the man who said: "I tried Palm Beach and I tried Zen. I drank the best scotch and I owned a Continental. But somehow, nothing seemed to matter very much."

Or George Sanders, suave and successful actor, who committed suicide in a Barcelona hotel room several years ago and left a note that read: "I'm B ored: I've lived long enough."

Now, men have always been pessimistic about life and its possibilities: but as we look back through history we see that it has usually been a despair born of resignation and defeat. After all, what did the serf on a feudal estate in the middle ages have to be optomistic and hopeful about? Life after death perhaps, but his expectation level for life in the world was rather limited. Or the Russian peasant, or the American black in the ghetto? What's new today is a despair that seems to result from power and wealth and influence. A modern theologian identifies it as "Promethean hopelessness" (Moltmann): i.e. the frustration of a man who gets everything he wants - who lives the good

life - who has things made - and yet, who still feels empty.

That hits close to home. All things are relative of course, but in comparison with our parents and grandparents: in comparison with almost everyone in the world, we have it made. And yet - integrety forces us to own up to moments when we wonder what it all means - or, in the words of a schmaltzy pop song, "Is that all there is?"

Well, there is an alternative to all of that. There is a life philosophy and life style that sees it all differently. It is best observed as it was lived by Jesus of Nazareth, and who said things like ("Go sell all that you have and give to the poor")- to a man who sounded like George Sanders: who said ("take up a cross and followsme"): and ("it's better to give than to receive"): a man who really was out-of-step when he suggested that fullness and joy are the result of loving and giving and sacrificing. That's still a bit of an alien idea.

One time he told a story about a very wealthy man who gave three of his servants some money and then went away. The scholars tell us that the amounts were not insignificant: the first received the equivalent of $10,000, the second - $5,000, the third - $1,000. When he returned some time later the first two had invested in business and doubled their money. They were handsomely rewarded. The third had hid the money under the mattress and returned to his master exactly what he had been given. For his efforts - for his prudence - he was treated as severely as anyone in the New Testament.

I am intrigued by two things in that story. First, what do you suppose would have happened had one of those first two servants lost the money? We have to assume that there was great risk involved - as there always is in financial investment. We hav to assume that there was at least the possibility of losing it all. The riskiness of the venture is magnified by the fact that it was not their money in the first place and that their master was not known as a particularly gracious loser. What wouldhave happened had they gambled and lost? I don't know, of course, but I chose to believe that they would not have been treated as harshly as number three who did not gamble, and therefore

neither won nor lost. I think that is what the parable teaches.

Second, I'm intrigued by the severity of the punishment meted out to this third servant. I'm intrigued because by any measure of fairness he was mistreated. He had shown himself, after all, to be prudent and safe and dependable. He was no gambler: he took no chances - he was, according to our standards, altogether admirable. Yet, as the story concludes he has been stripped of everything and unceremoniously thrown into the outer darkness. He didn't gamble and lost.

My growing conviction is that life is boring and dismal when we stop loving: when we stop appreciating and loving life itself and other people to the degree that we will no longer invest or gamble. My growing conviction is that our security - our affluence, have taught us to play our cards close to the chest: to avoid playing poker with life because we might lose. And we end up playing a lonely game of solitaire.

Love is always a gamble -real love. To be hurt in love: to commit oneself totally and then be hurt is to be wounded so deeply that we contemplate never taking that chance again. People sometimes experience that dynamic with pets. It's not uncommon for a family to refuse to replace Fido when he dies of old age, because it hurt so badly: they don't want to get that involved again.

The terrible pain of grief when a loved-one dies is a product of several dynamics - chief among them our love. ("If we love hard and deeply, then our sorrow will be like that, too. But it's worth it", is the way James Angell puts it.

To be hurt professionally - to love life enough to want to do more - is to risk being hurt very badly. I don't mind sharing with you now that I've lived with that for six months and it is very painful: and very tempting to pull back: to withdraw; to not be vulnerable to pain by not taking a chance.

To be hurt politically - to love our country or state or community enough to get involved in a campaign - or to run for office - is to risk being terribly hurt. And sometimes people who lose say ("I won't do anything like

that again because it hurts too badly." - cite Adlai Stevenson

The late C.=S. Lewis once wrote a paragraph that I have clipped and keep close at ~~&~~ hand:

> "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies, and little luxuries: avoid all entanglements: lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable.... The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven whereyou can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and pertubations of love is hell."

That sounds to me like what happened to the third servant in Jesus's story. To live openly, honestly, and fully is to gamble. To experience open, honest, creative,and fully Christian faith is also, I would suggest, to gamble.

Now, our understanding of faith is not usually related to words like risk and gamble and vulnerability. Faith, for most of us is assurance, certainty; or ecclessiastically the acceptance of certain doctrines and loyalty to a certain tradition. "Faith - Faithful - Faithfulness" ~~have~~ become soft, passive words. A faithful man is one who has stuck to his guns, played his theological, and moral cards close to his chest, and most of all has been quiet, serene and peaceful. In terms of what goes for the Christian ethic in our culture the faithful man is the one who has made a career out of keeping his hands clean, who doesn't do a lot of things that are regarded as sinful.

Jesus was saying that that is all wrong: that that is not what faithfulness means at all. Jesus was saying that faith means investment - not saving:

gambleing - not playing it safe. He was saying that a good and faithful servant is one who knows how to love the world, and his own community and his fellowman enough to invest - commit: to take some chances, to become vulnerable. He was saying that you and I are accountable - not on the basis of how much we were able to believe - not on the basis of all the evil we managed to avoid doing - not on the basis of the money in the ground - but very simply, on the degree to which we gambled inlove.

On the deepest possible level faith is a gamble. The honest man will know days when God does not seem Almighty: when God's love for the world seems like so much wishful thinking: when the very existence of God is a dubious proposition. How do we know? How do we know we are right? We don't. We have faith. We take a chance. We throw ourselves into the void and hope.

One of the most eloquent preachers of the past, G.A. Studdert-Kennedy - wrote a bit of prose that I have come to leve because it's truth is documented in my experience.

> "How do I know that God is good? I don't.
> I gamble like a man
> I bet my life
> Upon one side of life's great war. I must.
> I can't stand out. I must take sides. The man
> Who is neutral in this fight is not
> A Man."

That's where it rests for most of us. We ("bet ourlives on one side in life's great war")..We bet our lives on God.

Jesus told the story of the three servants to his disciples in the midst of the biggest gamble in his life. It was the last week: they had just come froma confrontation with the scribes and pharises in the Temple: the die was cast: he had gambled in coming tothe city: he had gambled again by going to the temple. And now he was saying to them: ("This is how it is. This is what it means to belong to me - to love and commit and to risk it all")

And beyond that God, himself, took the greatest gamble of all. God loved the world so much that he sent his son, to be born into a peasant family, to live a common life, to present his case to the people - gambling that they would hear and see, or that the whole project would be ignored. God put his son - his love - at the disposal of humanity: and he keeps putting it all on the line, gambling on you and me.

So - in life and in faith - let us remember that when we are tempted to make our little bargain with life; let us recall that to live is to love, and to love is to gamble. Let us remember, as we attempt to be faithful, that God himself, considers us worth taking a chance. AMEN

FATHER, YOUHave given us all we have - even our capacity to believe. In Jesus Christ you ~~alive~~ have called us to invest it all. Give us the will - the courage. AMEN